FIXING THE FACTS OR MISSING THE MARK?
Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq
By Joshua Rovner

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The major national security controversies over the last decade have revolved around intelligence. Critics blamed the intelligence community for failing to alert policymakers before the September 11 attacks, but others argued that the White House ignored intelligence that warned of the looming danger. Critics of intelligence also blamed it for exaggerating Iraq's capabilities and terrorist links before the war, but others argued that White House pressure caused intelligence leaders to inflate the threat. And the continuing controversy over estimates of the Iranian nuclear program has convinced some observers that the intelligence community is deliberately seeking to constrain policy. As these examples attest, it is impossible to understand contemporary strategic debates without thinking about the role of intelligence in strategy.

Yet despite its importance, the subject has received surprisingly little attention from scholars, and nothing like the gigantic body of research on civil-military relations. A great deal has been written on espionage, analysis, covert action, and deception. Much less has been written about the causes and consequences of intelligence-policy breakdowns. The irony is that the ongoing effort to reform intelligence will be all for naught if the intelligence community cannot build a productive relationship with policymakers. Even the perfect intelligence estimate is useless until it finds a receptive reader.

This E-Note outlines a framework for understanding intelligence-policy relations. It begins by describing intelligence-policy relations in the ideal, and then explaining some of the recurring problems that get in the way of productive interaction. I conclude by returning to the most notorious and controversial case of intelligence-policy failure: the war in Iraq.

PATHOLOGIES OF INTELLIGENCE-POLICY RELATIONS

Intelligence agencies need to cultivate good relations with policymakers, and not just because they risk becoming irrelevant if policymakers doubt that they provide any special information or insight. Close and continuing interaction is necessary so that intelligence provides timely answers to policymakers' questions; the intelligence community serves to assist policy, not to provide knowledge for its own sake. In addition, healthy relations give intelligence officials the opportunity to suggest some questions policymakers ought to ask.

Policymakers need intelligence to help them manage ambiguity and reduce uncertainty. The intelligence community is the one place where policymakers can go for finished estimates based on a combination of secret and open sources. As Richard Betts puts it, "The intelligence community is the logical set of institutions to provide what one may call the library function for national security: it keeps track of all sources, secret or not, and mobilizes them in coherent form whenever nonexpert policymakers call for them."[1]

What would intelligence-policy relations look like in the ideal? To start with, intelligence analysts would feel free to produce objective estimates on important issues without concern for policy preferences. They would also feel free to offer bad news without fear of recrimination. At the same time, policymakers would have the freedom to criticize intelligence products that

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[1] Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge & Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 5.

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they felt were sloppy, inaccurate, or otherwise unhelpful, and to demand better analyses without being accused of pernicious meddling. In sum, we can imagine a relationship characterized by healthy tension: intelligence and policy would routinely challenge one another in the best sense of the word.

But it is difficult to sustain this sort of healthy tension. Indeed, despite the fact that both sides need each other to varying degrees, intelligence-policy relations are characterized by friction. Part of the reason is that the policy and intelligence communities are different tribes.[2] Intelligence work is somewhat akin to scholarship, but policy work is action-oriented. Intelligence analysts are comfortable with uncertainty, but policymakers cannot let uncertainty get in the way of making decisions. Intelligence officials believe they provide a unique product, but policymakers do not always agree. They come into office with their own worldviews and their own networks that provide information and insight. They may express doubt that formal intelligence estimates and briefings offer any added value. For these and other reasons, friction is the norm.

Sometimes intelligence-policy relations boil over, however, and normal friction becomes debilitating dysfunction. Serious breakdowns in the quality of interaction come in several varieties. These are what I call the pathologies of intelligence-policy relations.

The most important pathologies are neglect and politicization. Neglect occurs when policymakers ignore intelligence altogether or cherry-pick for analyses that support their preexisting views. Rather than making any effort to incorporate intelligence in the decision-making process, leaders pay it little notice. Neglect may occur because leaders think that intelligence is completely shoddy, or because it does not conform to their preexisting beliefs and preferences, or because they trust their own sources and their own instincts. Intelligence agencies can also contribute to neglect if they deliberately sequester themselves from the policy process in order to protect their independence and objectivity. In extreme cases they can fall victim to what Sherman Kent called the "sickness of irresponsibility" and play no role whatsoever.[3] Regardless of who is to blame, the effects of neglect are important. Not only do policymakers risk missing important new information, but they also potentially lose a valuable intellectual check on their own assumptions and beliefs.

But the most damaging pathology is politicization, meaning the manipulation of intelligence to reflect policy preferences. Such manipulation comes in many forms. Direct politicization involves crude efforts to bully analysts into providing intelligence to please. Indirect politicization involves more subtle signals about the direction of desired estimates as well as the rewards for compliance and punishments for noncompliance. Policymakers and intelligence officials are both capable of politicization. Policymakers are guilty if they pressure intelligence agencies to change their findings in ways that are politically convenient. Intelligence officials may also indulge their own biases and let their policy preferences affect their analyses. Although this E-Note focuses on policy responses to intelligence, it is important to remember that intelligence officials are not stoic truth-seekers; they are perfectly capable of letting their own biases affect their conclusions.

Politicization has three main effects on threat assessment. First, it skews the tone and substance of estimates. Politicized intelligence tends to downplay ambiguous or contentious data and presents findings with an unusual sense of certainty. Policymakers who use intelligence to win public debates cannot abide estimates that are cautious and conditional, and they pressure intelligence to reach for conclusions that go far beyond the underlying data. While some errors are inevitable in any analysis, they are magnified as a result of policy manipulation. Second, the process of politicization inhibits reassessment. Intelligence agencies are less likely to revisit the kind of bold and unequivocal statements that are characteristic of politicized estimates, even after dissonant or contradictory information appears that might otherwise lead to a reexamination of old conclusions. Finally, episodes of politicization can poison intelligence-policy relations for many years after the fact by reinforcing mutual suspicions and stereotypes. In the aftermath of intelligence-policy controversies, policymakers may suspect that intelligence agencies are trying to obstruct their plans, and intelligence officials may become overly sensitive to anything that smacks of policy meddling. The upshot is a reduced role for intelligence in subsequent threat assessments. Rather than using intelligence estimates to inform their judgment, policymakers will increasingly rely on their own instincts.

IRAQ REVISITED

A comparison of U.S. and British intelligence before the war in Iraq provides a striking illustration of the effects of politicization on threat assessment. In 2002-2003, policymakers in both countries enlisted intelligence agencies in the effort to overcome domestic skepticism about Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. To do so, they pressured intelligence to base its conclusions on worst-case assumptions. Analysts on both sides of the Atlantic already suspected that Iraq was holding onto some small quantity of unconventional weapons, but until mid-2002 they were candid about the limits of available information due to their own inability to penetrate the Iraqi regime. Indeed, the departure of UN weapons inspectors in late 1998 meant that analysts were mostly forced to make estimates about Iraqi capabilities on the basis of assumptions about Iraqi intentions. Unsurprisingly, analysts from different agencies came to very different conclusions, as we now know from

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[2] Mark M. Lowenthal, "Tribal Tongues: Intelligence Producers, Intelligence Consumers" (1992), in Loch K. Johnson and James J. Wirtz, eds. *Strategic Intelligence: Windows into a Secret World* (Los Angeles, Roxbury Press, 2004), pp. 234-241.
[3] Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence and American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 183.

declassified estimates. Pressure from above led to much more ominous conclusions about Saddam Hussein's supposed arsenal beginning the summer before the war, however, and it also led intelligence officials to remove most of the previous indications of doubt and disagreement.[4]

This shift was the result of a fundamental change in the character of intelligence-policy relations. Before the summer policymakers had been perfectly willing to tolerate or ignore contrary views. Now they began to pressure intelligence to join the policy consensus on Iraq, which was moving toward the position that the threat was growing and that Saddam's regime was unacceptable. Indirect politicization took the form of repeated questioning on the same issues, which led some analysts to suspect that policymakers were fishing for answers that reflected their own beliefs. The process sent clear signals to the intelligence community about policy preferences, and analysts found themselves under pressure to deliver certain conclusions. Former CIA official Vincent Cannistraro notes that "analysts are human, and some of them are also ambitious… If people are ignoring your intelligence, and the Pentagon and NSC keep telling you, 'What about this? What about this? Keep looking!'— well, then you start focusing on one thing instead of the other thing, because you know that's what your political masters want to hear."[5]

Threat assessments began to accommodate political realities. While internal documents continued to reflect the ambiguity of the underlying data, estimates for policymakers were less cautious, as Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet admitted later.[6] On August 1, for example, the CIA delivered a comprehensive estimate for senior administration officials entitled, *Iraq: Expanding WMD Capabilities Pose Growing Threat*. Among other things, the estimate included ominous warnings that Iraq was determined to re-start its nuclear weapons program. The agency confidently concluded that a captured shipment of high-strength aluminum tubes was part of a nuclear enrichment program, despite the fact that this seems to have been a minority position in the intelligence community.[7]

The most important conclusions were in the National Intelligence Estimate, *Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*. The NIE, which was delivered to Congress on October 1, found that all the elements of Iraq's supposed program were growing. It declared that Iraq was actively producing chemical weapons and possessed 100-500 tons of agent, including mustard, sarin gas, cyclosarin, and VX. This was a significant jump from previous estimates, none of which claimed that Iraq had more than 100 tons in storage. The decision to set the upper bound at 500 tons was not the result of new information. Instead, it was based on the size of the Iraqi stockpile before the first Gulf War.[8]

The NIE also concluded that Iraq had built a sprawling, clandestine biological weapons infrastructure and that it could evade detection by using mobile production facilities. Iraq had stockpiles of "lethal and incapacitating" BW agents, including anthrax and possibly smallpox, and had mastered the ability to produce dried agent, which was easier to disseminate and had a longer shelf-life. This was the first time an estimate had definitively stated that Iraq actually possessed biological weapons. Earlier estimates would not support such a conclusion without information from more reliable sources.[9] The NIE also judged that the regime was probably incorporating genetically modified pathogens into its offensive BW arsenal. When it decided to use pathogens, it could choose from an array of delivery vehicles, including "bombs, missiles, aerial sprayers, and covert operatives." Despite the certainty of the language in the estimate, none of these conclusions were based on corroborated information. In fact, the judgment that Iraq had the indigenous capacity to produce biological weapons was based on just two sources: an Iraqi defector with questionable motives, and a scientific journal article about Iraq's biotech industry.[10]

The NIE's judgment of Iraq's nuclear program concluded that international controls were not enough to prevent Iraq from acquiring a nuclear capability sometime before 2010. Iraq's attempts to procure high-strength tubes and other machinery demonstrated a clear interest in uranium enrichment, it said, even though it was a long way from achieving an indigenous full-fuel cycle. But if Iraq was able to surreptitiously acquire weapons-grade fissile material from abroad, which was not unrealistic given the apparent breakdown in the sanctions regime, the timeline would be measured in months not years. As with the sections on chemical and biological warfare, this conclusion drew on worst-case assumptions about Iraqi intentions: "Although we assess that Saddam does not *yet* have nuclear weapons or sufficient material to make any, he remains intent on

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[4] Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), pp. 137-184.

5 Quoted in Robert Dreyfuss, "The Pentagon Muzzles the CIA." *The American Prospect*, December 16, 2002, http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_pentagon_muzzles_the_cia

[6] George Tenet with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 370.

[7] SSCI Report, p. 93; and James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 87.

[8] SSCI Report, pp. 195-204.

[9] The SSCI Report notes that the main text of the estimate included some caveats about the lack of information about the production output at certain facilities. Most of the estimate remains classified. SSCI Report, pp. 162-166.

[10] The conclusion that Iraq had mastered the ability to produce dried agent was also based on flimsy intelligence. Intelligence officials relied on fourteen human source reports on Iraq's attempts to import drying and milling equipment, but only one of these sources tied these attempts to a BW program. SSCI Report, pp. 178-182, and 148-152.

acquiring them.”[11]

While assessments for policymakers were becoming less equivocal about the Iraqi threat, assessments for public consumption left no doubt at all. On October 4, the CIA published a declassified white paper based on the NIE.[12] The paper had the feel of a brochure, complete with color photos of Gulf War-era chemical munitions and satellite imagery of suspected BW production facilities. The public version of the estimate removed caveats and qualifying phrases like “we judge” and “we assess.” It also played down the deep divisions in the community on important issues. Sen. Bob Graham, a leading congressional critic of the Bush administration, called it a “vivid and terrifying case for war.”[13]

A similar story played out in Great Britain, where the Blair government used intelligence in public without mentioning the flimsiness of the underlying information. In September, it released a Joint Intelligence Committee dossier that included ominous details on all aspects of Iraq’s unconventional weapons programs. The dossier made headlines by arguing that that Iraq could launch attacks on British interests at a moment's notice. Speaking to the House of Commons on the day of publication, the prime minister declared that the intelligence picture was “extensive, detailed, and authoritative.”[14] In reality, the information behind the intelligence was limited, ambiguous, and unreliable, but the prime minister’s office had worked hard to ensure that the dossier would lead readers to conclude the worst. Staffers at 10 Downing Street were aware of gaps in the intelligence, and they worried that the dossier would look like an argument by assertion. Their solution was to remind readers that the government had unique access to secret intelligence. As one official put it, the government would benefit from releasing selective pieces of intelligence, “with names, identifiers, etc., blacked out.”[15]

To overcome public skepticism and parliamentary doubt, the government also invoked the authority of intelligence. Daniel Pruce, a staff member in the communications office, raised the issue when he asked, “Who will issue the text? Us? The Cabinet Office? Why don't we issue it in the name of the JIC? Makes it more interesting to the media.” He also predicted that readers would be drawn to the sections on new intelligence: “The draft already plays up the nature of intelligence sourcing. I think we could play this up more. The more we advertise that unsupported assertions…come from intelligence, the better.”[16] The final version of the dossier emphasized the intelligence mystique. The executive summary highlighted “significant additional information…available to the Government” that set it apart from other publicly available estimates. The prime minister’s introduction went further, suggesting that any gaps in the dossier were necessary to protect intelligence agents inside Iraq. Blair explained that the government could not publish everything it knew without risking sources and methods.[17] He summoned the aura of secret intelligence again when he delivered the dossier to Parliament. He reminded MPs that the JIC’s work is “obviously secret,” but that the seriousness of the issue was enough to justify the extraordinary step of publishing its assessment. Readers were left to assume that the JIC assessment was the reasoned opinion of analysts with a complete view of the classified intelligence.[18]

The process of politicization that began in 2002 led to analytical sclerosis in 2003. By December, policy pressure had encouraged analysts to take their assumptions about Iraq to logical extremes, and estimates became increasingly worrying. Not only did they conclude that Iraq possessed significant stockpiles of unconventional weapons, but they also asserted that information gaps were the result of Iraqi concealment and deception.[19] Moreover, by publishing estimates, intelligence agencies were disinclined from revisiting their conclusions, because doing so would have constituted a public admission that their earlier work was wrong. As a result, neither British nor American intelligence seriously reconsidered their leading assumptions, even after inspectors returned to Iraq and started sending back data for the first time since 1998. The fact that the UN and IAEA reported no signs of a reconstituted weapons program had no apparent impact on intelligence analysis.[20]

[11] NIE 2002-16HC, *Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, October 2002, p. 1. A redacted version was declassified in April 2004:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/nationalsecurity/documents/nie_iraq_wmd.pdf
[12] Director of Central Intelligence, *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs* (October 2002);
https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd/Iraq_Oct_2002.htm#01"
[13] Quoted in Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York, Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 138.
[14] Peter Gill, “Intelligence Oversight Since 9/11: Information Control and the Invasion of Iraq,” paper presented at the “Making Intelligence Accountable” workshop in Oslo, Norway, September 19, 2003, p. 10; http://www.dcaf.ch; and Report of a Committee of Privy Counselors, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London: The Stationary Office, 2004), p. 79. Hereafter the Butler Report.
[15] Bassett to Smith, et al., September 11, 2002.
[16] Pruce to Campbell, et al., September 11, 2002.
[17] *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction*, p. 6.
[18] Prime Minister’s Statement to Parliament, September 24, 2002.
[19] Tenet made this point in his annual threat assessment to Congress on February 11, 2003. See also Condoleezza Rice, “Why We Know Iraq Is Lying,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2003, p. 25.
[20] Hans Blix, Oral Introduction of the 12th Quarterly Report of UNMOVIC, March 7, 2003;

Indeed, by the time that IAEA and UN inspectors reported that they were unable to find large stockpiles of unconventional weapons, would-be dissenters faced political and institutional pressure to ignore them. Richard Aldrich notes that in the UK, most analysts developed "almost an ideological conviction…that all militarist dictators wish to acquire WMD and that they are all working busily to do so."[21] Analysts who let this conviction determine their conclusions were well received by policymakers as well as their supervisors. Skeptics found it difficult to argue a contrary position, despite the lack of information one way or the other. In the United States, dissenters had trouble finding institutional backing to pursue alternative hypotheses. Tyler Drumheller, the European division chief in the CIA, tried for months to track down Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri, who had been recruited by French intelligence.[22] Contrary to published intelligence estimates, Sabri reported through intermediaries that Iraq had no mobile BW facilities, and that it would at least 18-24 months to build a crude nuclear warhead even if it was able to import fissile material. But agency officials had no interested in pursuing these leads. One of Drumheller's subordinates was denied a meeting at CIA headquarters to review the new information. "It's time you learn it's not about intelligence anymore," he was told. "It's about regime change."[23]

The manipulation of intelligence in Great Britain and the United States led to exaggerated assessments of Iraqi capabilities. Politicized estimates accepted worst-case assumptions about Iraq, downplayed disagreements among analysts, and presented findings with an unrealistic sense of certainty. Politicization also inhibited reassessment in the months before the war, despite incoming reports from international inspectors that cast doubt on previously published estimates. The long-term consequences on threat assessment are unclear, although politicization has clearly exacerbated mutual mistrust between policymakers and intelligence officials. Furious analysts have berated policymakers for manipulating their work, and policymakers have come close to accusing analysts of subversion. Richard Betts argues, with considerable justification, that the episode marks a nadir in the history of U.S. intelligence.[24] The same is true in Great Britain, where intelligence agencies and policymakers have suffered through a series of painful inquiries into the reasons for their collective failure.

http://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/SC7asdelivered.htm; and Mohamed ElBaradei, "The Status of Nuclear Inspections in Iraq: An Update," March 7, 2003; http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/2003/ebsp2003n006.shtml.

[21] Richard Aldrich, "Whitehall and the Iraq War: The UK's Four Intelligence Enquiries," *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 16 (2005), pp. 73-88, at 77.

[22] James P. Pfiffner, "Decisionmaking, Intelligence, and the Iraq War," in Pfiffner and Phythian, eds., *Intelligence and National Security Policymaking on Iraq*, pp. 213-232, at 224-225.

[23] Tyler Drumheller with Elaine Monaghan, *On the Brink: An Insider's Account of How the White House Compromised American Intelligence* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf, 2006), pp. 91-98, quoted at 95. See also Isikoff and Corn, *Hubris*, pp. 200-201; and Walter Pincus, "CIA Learned in '02 That Bin Laden had No Iraq Ties, Report Says," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 15, 2006, p. A14.

[24] Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence*, pp. 91-98.